

A TOWN HALL FOR LAFAYETTE

by

Ruth Caroline Dyer

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The Town Hall has served Lafayette for over sixty years. This is a simple story of that building and the part it has played in the life of our community. It tells how people with energy, wisdom and courage planned, built, and operated the Lafayette Town Hall. It is a brief account of a great variety of civic activities which have taken place there.

To the early settlers of Lafayette and to their delightful descendants this history is dedicated.

A Town Hall for Lafayette?

A Town Hall for Lafayette? But Lafayette is just a village of two hundred people scattered about the countryside. Isn't that too ambitious? The men meeting in November, 1911, did not foresee a large building standing on Moraga Road for over sixty years. Instead, the idea of a Town Hall grew in the minds of the founders of the Lafayette Improvement Club as they undertook projects for the betterment of the community.

The Pioneer Store fronted the Lafayette Plaza which Elam Brown had given to the settlement in 1864. Robert E. McNeil, owner of the store from 1903 to 1934, was among those concerned about conditions in Lafayette. Something should be done to improve the looks of the Plaza. And what about the poor roads, miserably muddy in winter, fire protection, better quality schools, additional means of transportation (most of it offered by the Oakland, Antioch and Eastern Railway), and an assured water supply? There would be plenty of projects for an improvement club to undertake. Mr. McNeil offered his store as a meetingplace for interested citizens.

Present at that first meeting were Robert E. McNeil, Grover Coates, Ed Keefe, J. A. Gerow, J. W. McAtee, Loyd Brown, B. Hollenbeck,

George French, J. F. Root, A. T. Graff, Ed Rowland, C. H. Perry, and Charles Rimhark. Among other items of business, it was "regularly moved, seconded and carried that ladies be admitted to (the) next and all subsequent meetings." Mrs. McNeil was present at the next one. Mr. Rimhark served briefly as the first President, Mr. H. Mullikin as the first Secretary. Shortly George S. Meredith began many years' service as President.

The Lafayette Improvement Club needed a permanent meeting-place. The Trustees of the Lafayette School District were asked for the use of the old school house. A committee to repair the old building was named, and plans were made to haul lumber. By mid-February, 1912, it was voted instead to build a Town Hall, and means of financing this venture were initiated. It was estimated the building would cost \$490.00.

Securing a lot for the building was a major undertaking. Early in 1913 Mr. McNeil offered to lease a 40' x 90' lot to the club for five years for \$25.00 yearly. The offer was accepted. Soon, however, the sales manager of the Burgess Company (Moraga Land Company) offered to give the club a 50' x 120' lot provided the building plans were approved by the company. The Board of Directors accepted the Burgess offer. A committee set to work on plans for a town hall.

Late in November there still was no deed from the Moraga Land Company. Mr. Lamp offered a lot for \$250.00 and 50 shares of stock. Meanwhile George Meredith had investigated other possibilities for a lot, and in December a generous offer was made: Frank and Rosa Ghiglione would deed property to the Lafayette Improvement Club and donate \$200.00 in addition. The offer was accepted, and on this

property the Lafayette Town Hall stands today.

Within a month of its founding the Lafayette Improvement Club had begun to raise funds for its projects. The first affair, on November 25, 1911, was a dance in the hayloft "at A. T. Graff's new barn" on Happy Valley Road. \$24.00 was raised. Other dances followed monthly, including one in the McNeil barn -- before the horses were stabled there. Gala suppers were prepared by the ladies of Lafayette.

Fund-raising functions proved highly successful. Income from monthly dances, often \$200.00 to \$300.00, was used to pay for the hall. However, after it was agreed a town hall should be built, a \$5,000.00 stock corporation was formed. This was the Lafayette Improvement Club Corporation. One hundred and eighty shares of the first stock were issued for \$10.00 each. Par value was \$1.00. Membership in the Lafayette Improvement Club was offered to anyone who paid \$.50 and helped "to fix the hall," as well.

Later the legality of this second issue of stock was questioned. In September, 1934, all stockholders were notified that shares issued since October 31, 1913, were illegal and void. Members were asked to return those certificates and to receive new ones. Many complied. All shareholding was ended in 1941.

In this same year the process of replacing the Lafayette Improvement Club with the Lafayette Improvement Association began. This required adoption of a new Constitution and By-Laws. It was hoped the new organization would be run by active members, not just the Board of Directors as in the earlier organization.

Title to the Town Hall was transferred from the Lafayette Improvement Club to the Lafayette Improvement Association in 1944. In 1953, to insure the validity of the new ownership, title was

acquired by the Lafayette Improvement Association for \$1.00 and "other valuable considerations."

Until 1914, however, there were an organization, a lot, and some money, but as yet no Town Hall. In October, 1913, a meeting had been called by the Lafayette Improvement Club to receive bids for the new building. None were submitted. The plans were too ambitious in view of the funds available. The building committee worked with an architect to bring the cost down to \$2,000. On November 1 the low bid of \$1,989.50 was submitted. It was accepted, revised, and accepted as revised. The bid had been too low because of an error in the lumber bill.

Work on the Town Hall was delayed because of opposition to the first plans. No banquet room had been provided. It was decided to build a two-story structure with the first floor to be completed later. Day work was hired. The men of Lafayette worked on Saturdays, holidays, and in the evenings. Albert Gerow was the contractor. The Town Hall was completed in six weeks.

On May 1, 1914, the Town Hall opened officially. On the first floor a bean feed was offered. This was Albert Gerow's idea. The beans were cooked all night in a rock-lined pit behind the Town Hall. Above, on the second story with its fine spring floor, was dancing. On the following night the Grand Opening Ball was held. Children helping to decorate were admitted free.

Years of Saturday night dances followed. Sometimes they were weekly, more often monthly. They began at 9:00 P. M., at midnight a fine supper was served, and the music stopped at 3:00 or 5:00 A. M. For years Al Weber's orchestra from Oakland provided the music.

The early dances were very successful. Sometimes 500 people attended; one estimate is 725. People came from throughout Contra Costa County and the Bay Area. Many came by the Oakland, Antioch and Eastern train, arriving at the West Lafayette station at the end of School Street near Birdhaven Court. Special trains arrived at nine o'clock and left at 3:30 A. M. If a dance lasted longer -- and they sometimes did -- the train would wait until 5:00 A. M. Connections to Oakland, Walnut Creek, Martinez, and Antioch made the trains popular.

The dance tickets were invitational and sold for \$1.50 a couple, \$.50 for single ladies. Costs were low. The ladies of Lafayette prepared the suppers. Robert E. McNeil provided all the supplies at cost. Children helped with the decorations. Wires were strung in the hall, and crepe paper was draped. Ferns might be brought from Briones Canyon, and sometimes palm branches were arranged about the hall. In the autumn grape leaves or other brilliantly colored vegetation made the hall festive. All the tables were decorated.

All day Saturday the women prepared for the supper dances. Tables were set up. Salads and cakes were made. The meat was cooked. Chicken dinners, steak dinners, ham, beans, or tamales might be served. There always was potato salad. This would be a typical supper: boiled ham, potato salad, cheese, olives and pickles, bread and butter, homemade cakes, and coffee. At one fall dance watermelons were served. The bill was \$6.00.

On Monday evenings the Town Hall was cleaned and the dishes washed. This was a big project. Mr. McNeil would start the water to boil in the wash tubs -- the tubs in which the potatoes had been boiled on Saturday. The women took charge of dish-washing. After the job was done the young people danced to the player piano upstairs.

This piano had been chosen after several auditions. Mr. Dewing and Mr. Marks had offered their pianos for sale, but the one selected was purchased from Mr. Evans in Antioch for \$300.00. It must have been popular, since at various times purchase of "four or five new records for the piano" would be authorized.

Improvements continued to be made. An art glass window was donated by Mr. Grooles. A sidewalk was built from "Bert Gerow's Place to the Hall." Rock from the County was laid from the Lafayette Hotel to the Town Hall. The cost of hauling it was \$130.00. Donations were accepted to meet this expense. Requests for better lighting at the West Lafayette Station were not heeded.

The Halloween Masked Balls were very popular. Costumes were from Oakland. Prizes were offered for the Most Elaborate Costume, the Best Sustained Character, the Most Comical Character. Probably the most humorous incident occurred as an Oakland man was waiting for the late train to leave West Lafayette. Apparently hungry, and dressed in his Indian costume, he jumped a fence and milked Mr. Meredith's cow -- "for breakfast."

Apparently there were problems, too. In May of 1915 the Board of Directors decided not to rent the hall to outsiders for balls for profit. Once a motorcycle group from East Oakland arrived and was told it would not be allowed in the hall. Frank Thomson, a large man and former blacksmith, was stationed at the door as the "bouncer." No further disturbance occurred.

Members of the Board of Directors, usually ten men, were devoted and hard-working. Among the names of those serving in the earlier years appear George Meredith, Robert McNeil, Colonel Garrett, Roy Bunker, Mr. Mullikin, Mr. Flood, Pat Medau, Clifford L. Feiler, M. D., Mr. Rodebaugh, C. F. Andreasen, Albert Gerow, Frank Thomson, Mr. Armanino,

Mr. Lemos, Mr. Lucas, John Voelker, L. I. Stark, and Dr. Powell.

The Town Hall was a recognized success. As it served the community, the Town Hall also served the needs of the nation. During the World War dances proved popular with the soldiers from the Presidio of San Francisco who were camped at Walnut Creek. How they enjoyed being entertained by the young ladies of Lafayette. The Red Cross Society was given use of the Town Hall for summer dances, and in October, 1917, the Lafayette Home Guard gave a Military Ball. Two Red Cross dances in 1918 raised \$50.00 and \$25.00. At another dance \$50.00 was raised for the Belgian Relief Committee.

Following the war additions were made to the Town Hall. Stairs were built at the back, for fire protection. A kitchen was added at the rear of the hall. Concrete was laid and the lower floor of the hall extended back 18 feet. Plumbing was repaired and the windmill, also. However, expenses were low. For example, the payment on County taxes in October, 1920, was \$15.49. The November P. G. and E. bill amounted to \$2.28.

The Town Hall Serves the Community

Interest in the monthly dances was waning. Lafayette was growing, and new requests were made of the Lafayette Improvement Club. In the early 1920's the Board of Directors discussed the feasibility of building a post office with the help of the Lafayette Bible Class from the Methodist Church. Dances were to be given, half of the proceeds to go to the club, and half to a post office fund. A lot was purchased for the post office, and the old school house was moved there. Also in the building were the library and the telephone "central."

In 1924 the Lafayette Fire Department was given permission to hold two dances in the hall. Proceeds supported community improvements. There was no charge for use of the Town Hall. During the following year the firemen gave dances to pay for an electric sign reading "Lafayette."

Little use had been made of the Town Hall by young people. A request for use of the Town Hall as a gymnasium by the Young Peoples Club was denied; it was said the building was not suited to such use. The young people were to be disappointed for a few more years.

Still searching for use of the hall for dances, the club considered leasing it to the White Rose Orchestra for weekly affairs, or perhaps to the University orchestra for monthly dances. Late in 1926 private dancing lessons began in the Town Hall.

An attempt to get the Walnut Creek theater to show films in the Town Hall succeeded after two years' efforts. Profits would be divided evenly between the operator and the club. The project was abandoned in a few months. The Lafayette Improvement Club netted \$36.20.

Hall rental fees were raised. The charges? \$1.50 when there was no admission fee, \$4.00 when admission was charged. Apparently the public dances did not prove to be satisfactory, since the Board of Directors decided not to have the Town Hall used for public dances. They "were not particularly creditable." However, the Lafayette Athletic Club was allowed to have public dances on a good conduct agreement which included cleaning and fire protection clauses. This privilege was extended to the Lafayette Fire Department. Shortly the privilege was withdrawn from each organization. Further revenue came in 1929 from the Ladies Aid Society of the Methodist Church, its bazaar having been a success. Heating of the Town Hall was not adequate, however. Because of it, the Board of Directors met in the Lafayette School across the street.

The following spring the Boy Scouts were told they could use the Town Hall for a gymnasium if the windows were screened and the hall cleaned after use. After a delay of two years this was accomplished.

"A deficit of about a dollar in the treasury which made it impossible to pay the insurance due on the hall was covered when Colonel Garrett donated a dollar." Times were hard indeed. Should the Town Hall be remodeled or torn down? It was decided to repair the hall and make arrangements for heating it. A new stove was put on trial, and repairs were made. The repairs proved satisfactory, the

stove not. It was returned, and the Town Hall remained cold. Despite the frustrations, interest in improvements continued. Plantings around the building were planned; no water was available. In April, 1931, a large open meeting was held previous to an election to form a water district. Eventually Lafayette would be served by the East Bay Municipal Utility District.

With its windows screened, and reflectors and electric lights installed for proper lighting, the Town Hall was ready for recreational use in 1932. Boys aged 12 to 15, inclusive, were allowed to have games, and once a week the Camp Fire Girls had a recreation night.

In the depths of the Depression in 1933 a Berkeley couple gave a marionette show and dance for the benefit of the Unemployment Exchange. They were not charged for the use of the Town Hall.

During the following year ways were sought to finance a better-looking and more useable Town Hall. Use of federal assistance was considered. For example, CWA (Civil Works Administration) funds and labor were available provided the improved property were given to the County. The PWA also would provide labor and material, while under a state program a community project could be remodeled by SERA (State Emergency Relief Administration) labor. It was even suggested the land be deeded to the Lafayette School District which could then rent the Town Hall to the Lafayette Improvement Club. The Board of Directors pondered. Eventually the Lafayette Improvement Club, as a nonprofit corporation, decided to finance the remodeling through sale of stock. Old stock issued since October 31, 1913, was recalled and new stock issued. (See page 3.)

At this point in 1935 new life began to center around the Town Hall and funds were raised for its renovation. For several years the Fiesta

de Lafayette was held in connection with the Annual Horse Show of the Contra Costa County Horse Show Association. On a Saturday and Sunday in August there was a parade of 300 horses, followed by boxing and wrestling, a bathing beauty revue, booths, games, and dancing and other activities. All the events were held in or near the Town Hall. In 1936 \$1,700 was raised for the construction of a new town hall, or for renovation of the existing building to conform to the Spanish architecture of the Lafayette School. Additional money was raised to build the tennis courts and playgrounds at the school.

The ladies of Lafayette formed an Athletic Club, with professional instruction. Rental for the Town Hall was \$2.00 monthly. It was agreed that the insurance carried on the Town Hall probably was too high: \$3,000. .

Each community organization was asked to submit suggestions for a new town hall. Eventually two plans were submitted: one calling for construction of a new building to cost \$10,000, and the other a \$6,000 remodeling project. In March, 1937, the Board of Directors decided the existing Town Hall would be remodeled. A new building would not be built. Plans for a larger auditorium were eliminated. In two years the Veterans Memorial Building would be completed. It would have a large auditorium available. It was believed also that one would be needed soon at the Lafayette School. Large groups could be accommodated there, across School Street from the Town Hall. \$1,500 plus a maximum of 10% was voted for the remodeling job.

This did not solve the piano problem, however. The Improvement Club had been moving one in from the Lafayette School when necessary, as the old piano was inadequate. It was necessary to purchase a new instrument. Money was raised by subscriptions of \$.50 each. In six

months there was a new piano and an extra \$8.00 in the treasury. The citizens again had proven their generosity.

One other event of 1936 is noteworthy. The Boy Scouts were given permission to hold a dance for young people in the Town Hall. It was a success, 70 tickets being sold. After all expenses had been met, including \$30.00 for an orchestra and \$1.00 for floor wax, there was a profit of \$23.57.

Renovation continued. A new floor was laid. This was accomplished with "the help of labor supplied by Sheriff Miller," his men laying a load of crushed rock on the lower level. (Sheriff John Miller was president of the Horse Show Association.) Apparently most of the rest of the work was accomplished through volunteer efforts! New chairs were bought, two oil burning heaters installed, the piano box moved to the level of the stage, and the library room almost completed. A fire escape was built on the south side of the building, and a knotty pine exterior finish added.

The first event in the renovated Town Hall was a Lafayette Fire Department dance held on May Day, 1937. Next the Lafayette Garden Club was given the privilege of Town Hall use "any time it wishes," for \$2.50 a month. A large number of residents met with the County Planning Commission in an event sponsored by the Lafayette Improvement Club. The Planning Commission had zoned Lafayette strictly residential. Strong reaction came from the businessmen. Following this, the club first investigated the financial feasibility of incorporating Lafayette. Periodically thereafter the club, later the Lafayette Improvement Association, was to consider incorporation of the community. Matters of zoning continued to be serious concerns of the residents. Eventually this was reflected in an affirmative vote for incorporation in 1968.

The fourth annual Horse Man's Ball was held in mid-August.

People from all over the East Bay were invited to attend. Admission to this Forty-Niners affair was \$.49. However, successful as the ball was, the dance hall was not being used sufficiently. Originally only local civic organizations had been allowed to hold dances there. Now the privilege was extended to allow fraternity dances as well.

One of the chief motivations for remodeling the Town Hall had been the need of a new location for the Lafayette Library. The old school building at 3553 Mt. Diablo Boulevard owned by the Lafayette Improvement Club could no longer serve as post office, telephone exchange, and library. The library would be moved to the Town Hall. A mass protest meeting followed this announcement. This would be too inconvenient a location. Think of the distance! A Superior Court injunction was handed down but removed when the Lafayette Improvement Club assured the court the removal would be temporary only.

Actually the Lafayette Library was an old institution, and many residents had interested themselves in it personally. It was started by the three-member Bible Class of the Lafayette Community Methodist Church and handed over to the Improvement Club as its responsibility. (See page 8.) The library had shared its site with the post office and telephone exchange for thirteen years. Following its removal the library would remain on the first floor of the Town Hall for two years only. In 1940 it was moved to a new building on the school grounds nearby. The American Legion had initiated the search for a permanent location. Jointly with a committee from the Lafayette Improvement Club the members recommended a site on land held by the Lafayette Fire District. Movement leading to formation of a new library committee was initiated. Funds were raised, and the new building was the result. Because of sensitivity

concerning the library site, townspeople arose in the middle of the night and moved the library to the new building.

It was in 1937 also that a series of crises over fire safety began. Modern state codes had established new standards for public buildings. At times the Town Hall was threatened with permanent closure unless these standards were met. A communication from the State Fire Marshal required a few relatively minor changes to the newly-remodeled structure. The rear stairs were extended to reach the ground level, the heating oil container was moved over 30 feet from the building, and approved exit lights were installed.

Completed ten years previously, the Lafayette School was now overcrowded. A temporary classroom was set up on the first floor of the Town Hall. However, rumors persisted that the Town Hall was unsafe, despite an engineer's report that it was safe for as large a crowd as it could hold. In response to public opinion the Board of Directors authorized a new survey of the building. Apparently this second engineer's report allayed fears. Classes met in the Town Hall.

Now a new project was undertaken. Efforts to raise money for repairs to the building housing the post office and telephone exchange began. A dance and a fund-raising card party were held, and once again the possibility of a lessee's showing weekly movies was pursued.

Improvements to the Town Hall continued to be made. A composition shingle roof was added. Service and silverware for 100 people were purchased, and a townsman offered to provide a sink and stove for the kitchen. The Board of Directors recognized that the Town Hall had been designed for the use of the entire community. The building was now made available to all civic organizations in Lafayette for the cost of the janitor, water, and lights. This was about \$5.00 a month.

In 1939 The Forum, forerunner of the Lafayette Women's Club, began to hold its meetings in the Town Hall. It contributed a fair share of the heating and lighting expense and paid one-sixth of the cost of the drapes, \$6.00. Membership in The Forum grew rapidly from 32 to 85. Thus it was necessary to meet elsewhere, first in the Fire House, and in the 1940's in the Veterans Memorial Building.

Other cultural mediums reached the Town Hall. In October, 1939, Miss Ohlstrom Spence gave singing lessons there on Saturday mornings at \$1.00 weekly.

The popular Lafayette Playshop began as a division of The Forum. Membership was open to men and women, providing "an opportunity for interested would-be Thespians to go to work." Also there was "a great need for persons interested in stagecraft and costuming or just amateur carpentry." For eight years the Playshop used the Town Hall for its productions. Looking back on those years of the 1940's participants recall some of the happiest years of their lives. The stage was greatly improved, new lights were installed, and the walls freshly painted. All was made in readiness for opening night, December 3, 1941.

The first theatrical undertaking of the Playshop was a series of three one-act plays. Erwin Mattson and Miss Carlie Fowler starred in "the screaming farce" "Don't Feed the Animals," directed by Mrs. Darlie Fuller. Following was "In Her Defense" in which Jack Pedder, Velda O'Neil, Adrienne Sowers, Pauline Stegman, and LeRoy Sowers showed their talent. The third play, "Between Dances," was "a delightful 20-minute scene from real life."

A year later, when the Playshop was solvent, nominal rental was charged for use of the Town Hall. In time rental reached \$15.00 for each show night. A precedent was established when the Playshop received

permission to apply rent moneys to further improvements to the Town Hall. The stage was improved further, and all hazardous temporary wiring was eliminated, receiving the approval of Fire Marshal Peakes. Additional money was donated for tennis courts at the Lafayette School. Later the Playshop performances were moved to Acalanes High School, and the Straw Hat Reviews were given in the Town Hall.

Truly the Town Hall was serving the community of Lafayette. In 1940, for example, these activities were held there:

Lafayette American Legion Post and Ladies Auxiliary
52 regular meetings
2 rehearsals
2 plays
(The Legion paid \$1.85 for each meeting.)

-Men's Athletic Club
52 regular meetings (at \$1.39 a meeting)

School children
5 dances

Lafayette Improvement Club
12 regular meetings
8 meetings of the Board of Directors
3 meetings for the Fiesta

Lafayette Fire Department
2 dances

Lafayette P. T. A.
1 birthday celebration
2 card parties
10 regular meetings

Lafayette Forum
12 regular meetings

Lafayette Garden Club
12 regular meetings
1 Flower Show

Miscellaneous uses: 10

Throughout the year, day or night, the downstairs was used 120 times, the upstairs 71 times. The Town Hall fulfilled its civic purpose.

Now the Veterans Memorial Building was completed. The American Legion proposed leaving to the Town Hall its stove, in lieu of two months' rent. Was this indicative of a never-ending heating problem?

It has been noted that through most of its existence the Lafayette Town Hall had been used as a center of adult activities. However, in late 1940 and 1941 it was converted into a gathering-place for some of the estimated 500 residents of school age. It was hoped that the Lafayette Improvement Club would receive the support of other organizations so that paid activity directors would be hired. The building was adapted to its new use. The project included checking lights, repairing wiring, painting the downstairs white, setting up a badminton court upstairs, providing for table tennis, installing an inexpensive pool table, making available work benches and tools for arts and crafts, and providing a First Aid kit. A room was available for games of chess, dominoes, checkers, and cards. In order to raise the needed funds a dance for students was held. There was a nominal charge with student body card.

Now the Town Hall was open for recreation on Tuesdays and Thursdays, with an average attendance of twenty. The crafts program was active; the upstairs was used by organized groups. In the fall of 1941 the youths' use of the facilities was limited to a direct ratio of the adult use, so that adult groups would be able to meet. Later, due to lack of leadership and shorter available hours, a tapering off of recreational use was noticed. However the Boys Club gave "feeds" and raised \$25.00 for club sweatshirts.

There were many other activities in the Town Hall in 1941. Clifford L. Feiler, M. D., active also in civic affairs, held a First Aid class. The Lafayette Fiesta was successful as usual.

For the eighth annual event, there were two dances with two bands. The American Legion provided the refreshments. In September the problem of cold in the Town Hall was reduced. The upstairs hall was sheathed with knotty pine, as were the small meeting room and office downstairs, the stairway, and the doors. This provided the needed insulation. Later in the fall oil heaters were installed. News-paper articles noted that the Playshop productions would take place in well-heated quarters. So they did, opening to large audiences just four days before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The War Years and Beyond

On January 5, 1942, a letter of inquiry was received from the federal government regarding use of the Town Hall as a barracks. Six non-commissioned Marines from the Navy Preflight School at St. Mary's College were allowed to rent one room for \$5.00 each, monthly.

Community activities continued, but the emphasis changed. The P. T. A. worked on plans to operate the Recreation Center. A Lafayette Horse Show Association Dance given in May netted over \$300. The proceeds were given to the Civilian Defense Council. A request for a dance was received from the Army Quartermaster Corps.

School dances were held, also, and there were problems. A letter of May 23, 1942, from Fire Chief Ed Morrison made this clear. He asked to be told whenever a dance was held at the Town Hall because high school students from "an East Bay town" had held a dance -- "a big crowd" -- with no adult there. Hay had been spread around, there was smoking and drinking, and paper was on the walls. The fire hoses were thrown in the back room. Chief Morrison stipulated that an adult must be in attendance at a school dance. At another similar dance, he continued, the only lights on were the two exit signs.

For MacArthur Day, June 12 and 13, a Civilian Defense Exhibit was on display in the Town Hall and the Lafayette School auditorium. During

the months following consideration was given to turning the Town Hall over to the U. S. O., but the navy men at St. Mary's did not have sufficient time away from the Preflight School to make this feasible.

Work continued on the Town Hall. A sign reading "Lafayette Improvement Club Hall" was authorized. \$75.00 was voted for refinishing the dance floor. Sheriff Miller was asked for "No Trespass" signs, since several windows had been broken and the rear door broken in. The Club hoped the signs would make it possible to prosecute the vandals.

Then on November 18, 1942, just before a meeting of the Board of Directors, fire broke out in the Town Hall. At the time one enlisted man was housed there. No direct cause of the fire was ever named, however. Damage amounted to \$1,255.52. Insurance covered the loss. At the time of the fire the entire building was designated a Red Cross First Aid Station and Refugee Collection Center, and one room was used by the Disaster Relief Committee of the American Red Cross. In order to repair the fire damage it was necessary to procure materials through the War Production Board Projects Requirements Plan. Parts of the second floor siding to the peak of the roof would have to be rebuilt. Wiring must be repaired, as must the auditorium floor.

It would require several weeks before priorities for materials were received from the War Production Board. Meanwhile a tarpaulin was to be secured on the damaged roof. Should new tenants be sought? The men who had been renting the room were transferred. It was voted to keep the room available for meetings, but it could be re-rented if desired. In February, 1943, the Navy Preflight School took the bunks out of the Town Hall.

Weeks of discouragement followed the fire. Perhaps the Town Hall should be scrapped. It was suggested that Universal Pictures might be willing to make an offer for the lumber. With the estimates of rebuilding parts of the Town Hall running from \$1,800 to \$2,000, its sale for used lumber might be the wisest course. With receipt of a check from the insurance company covering the fire damage, and approval from the War Production Board, the spirits of the Lafayette Improvement Club members rose. Insurance coverage was raised to \$6,000, the value of the building; War Damage Insurance also was taken out. By April, 1943, all repairs except those requiring some wiring had been made.

Now there arose an opportunity to rent the Town Hall for school use. Due to wartime restrictions construction of new classrooms at the Lafayette School would not be possible. It was proposed that the lower floor of the Town Hall be remodeled into two temporary classrooms. This would free the school auditorium from being used as a school classroom. The school district would undertake necessary construction. When the space was vacated, improvements would revert to the school. "A few years ago," it was noted, when a class was in the Town Hall the Club charged \$1.00 yearly rental. (The school district paid the utility bills.)

After the Second World War, in 1947, classes again were held in the Town Hall. For six months in 1949 kindergarten met there. By that time the Lafayette School District paid a rental fee of \$35.00 monthly.

Even after fire damage had been repaired, the auditorium of the Town Hall did not meet safety standards. In July, 1943, a letter from a Fire Commissioner to the Fire Marshal noted "considerable" work was needed on the Town Hall before it would be safe for a crowd "of any size." One director threatened to resign if plans for the projected Victory

Garden Show continued. The show was held nevertheless, with 45 to 75 exhibitors and an attendance of 600 to 700 people. However, the Fiesta Dance was cancelled, since the State Fire Marshal required about \$1,500 worth of work on the building before there was a "gathering of any kind." He set down these requirements for fire safety:

If not more than 100 persons were in the building
certain obstructions by the doors on the second floor
should be removed
exit signs should be installed
drapes and similar materials should be flameproofed
panic hardware should be installed on the doors.

If there were more than 100 persons present
no more than 250 should be on the dance floor
there should be outside exit stairs
there should be a door downstairs on the north wall.

Priorities were granted. Safety measures were taken. Heating facilities also were improved. Volunteers rebuilt the stairways and boarded up the area under the stairs. The outside was painted.

Two years later the windows needed repairing and underpinnings costing about \$1,000 were required. The Girl Scouts were given permission to fix over the small room for their use. In 1947 the State Fire Marshal required a general cleanup of combustibles, freer exits, and more open passageways. Compliance followed.

Types of uses of the Town Hall and activities of the Improvement Club were changing, also. The Club recognized the need to bring more businessmen into membership. This was especially necessary since it was in the process of changing over to the Lafayette Improvement Association. (See page 3.) In 1943 the Club was instrumental in getting house numbers for Lafayette residences.

It was proposed that a sheet metal shop be established on the ground floor of the Town Hall. The Board refused to allow this. It did permit the Sea Scouts to use the Town Hall for storage during their

paper drive. They in turn would try to put wire over some rear windows and replace some broken glass.

There was concern that title to the Town Hall property might revert to the original family ownership. In order to prevent this, the Improvement Club deeded the property to the Lafayette Improvement Association in 1944 and again through another deed in 1953. (See pages 3 and 4.)

The question of gambling arose in connection with an old timers' dance and the dance held at the time of the 1944 Horse Show. The Board of Directors ruled that if gambling were to take place a person must be at the door to see no school children were admitted. This was not sufficient assurance to some members of the Lafayette community. Notice of disapproval was received from the Men's Club of the Lafayette Community Methodist Church. It expressed "opposition to any and all illegal means of raising revenue for any cause however good." The Men's Club further requested "the law enforcement agencies to enforce the laws . . . in regard to gambling without fear or favor."

Residents of Lafayette received a mailing from Frank P. Westfall advising them of illegal gambling devices -- including 20 slot machines, roulette wheels, and gaming tables -- to be used at two dances in August. Taking part in the dance were the Lafayette Improvement Association, the Lions Club, the American Legion, and the Dad's Club. The sheriff and district attorney, Westfall said, reportedly had agreed not to interfere. Appeals to the organizations to give up their plans had failed.

Almost a year later a new policy was announced. The Board of Directors of the Lafayette Improvement Association voted not to sponsor a dance combined with gambling. Meanwhile progress had been made on a Teen Canteen through the assistance of the Lafayette Improvement Association, the Lions Club, the American Legion, and the Dad's Club.

Approval was given to a request to turn over the entire lower floor to a permanent headquarters and to have occasional dances on the upper floor.

Apparently it became necessary to formulate additional policies regarding dances. The Town Hall was not to be rented for regular public dances, but for social occasions, annual dances, and similar functions on occasion. Meanwhile the Town Hall was being used regularly. In October, 1946, for example, these organizations met there: the Rugby Club, Western Electric, the Playshop, the Boy Scouts, and the Girl Scouts. During the following month the Viking Club of Berkeley High School held a dance, paying a \$30.00 fee and cleaning charges.

All did not proceed satisfactorily, however. It was decided to cancel all outside organization rentals because of "undue noise, unfulfillment of obligations, etc." until further notice. The Big C Society was reimbursed for expenses already incurred for its planned function. Scout meetings also were affected.

It will be recalled that early in the history of the Town Hall church groups had taken an interest in activities there. In 1944 it was agreed to allow any religious organization free use of the Town Hall. The executive secretary of the San Francisco Bay Cities Baptist Union made the first request, for rental of the Town Hall for one year. Permission was granted. For a fee of \$5.00 a Sunday the Baptists had use of the building from 9:30 A. M. to 12:30 P. M. and from 7:00 to 9:30 P. M. on Sundays, and additionally some afternoons. Leading the congregation was divinity student William Reid, whose wife's mother was living in Lafayette. The Baptist Church in the Valley used the premises for ten months in 1947. This congregation formed the Pleasant Hill Community Baptist Church. During the following spring the Town Hall

was the location of the Assembly of God.

Dancing classes began again, also. Grace A. Lowell from Berkeley held classes on Thursday and Friday afternoons, paying \$5.00 weekly for five hours' use of the building.

Again fund-raising for a new town hall was proposed. A Wishing Well would be available at the Lafayette Fiesta. It was anticipated that pennies from children would be the main source of money raised there. House-to-house solicitation of funds also was planned. Local newspapers promised their cooperation in the campaign. However, a new building was not constructed.

For four summers beginning in 1947 the Town Hall was the location of the popular Straw Hat Reviews. Performances were six nights a week. Eventually the "Straw Hatters", organized by John G. Denver, Maryesther Wood Denver, and Elizabeth Berryhill, paid a summer's rent of \$710.00. Many residents of the Bay Area knew of the Town Hall only as a theater, but they retained an interest in the old structure.

On a rainy day in December, 1950, a massive earth slide suddenly closed all four lanes of the highway just west of Orinda. For weeks cars were routed through Tilden Park or by way of the San Pablo Dam Road to points beyond the Berkeley Hills. Miraculously no automobile had been damaged by the slide, no person was killed or injured. But it was necessary to cancel two performances in the Town Hall.

. . . And Into the Present

Although the Town Hall was becoming most-known for the dramatic presentations there, its uses continued to be varied. In 1951 it was occupied almost every day, by organizations such as these:

- the Roman Catholic Church, for religious instruction
- the Lafayette Elementary School, for music
- the League of Jewish Women
- the P. T. A.
- the Lafayette Playshop
- the Cub Scouts
- the Dad's Club, as for a Halloween Party
- the Lafayette Improvement Association.

Occasionally a school assembly was held there.

Increased rentals followed in 1952. During two school years the Jewish Sunday School classes met in the Town Hall. The Assembly of God worshipped there, the Boy and Girl Scouts met there, it was a polling place, Mrs. McAllister used it for soldiers (probably from Camp Stoneman), the Girl Scouts held a dance, vaccinations were offered, and performances by the Lafayette Playshop and the Straw Hatters were rehearsed upstairs.

In mid-1953 county inspectors found twenty-nine items of electrical work in violation of state codes. The Town Hall must be brought up to standard as a theater. Apparently the code provisions were met. However, in December, 1955 the fire marshal stated that due to the

nature of the building all users must get a permit from him. A committee was appointed to see if the Town Hall should be abandoned.

During this critical period Russell Bruzzone, grandson and heir of Frank and Rosa Ghiglione, appeared before a meeting of the Board of Directors. The Ghigliones had deeded to the Lafayette Improvement Club the land on which the Town Hall stands. (See page 2.) Mr. Bruzzone notified the Board of his intention to build a medical-dental building near the Town Hall. He stated that Moraga Road would become a four-lane highway and the adjacent land should be commercial in use. Rezoning the land in the area of the Town Hall was discussed. At the conclusion of its meeting with Mr. Bruzzone the Board restated its support of the existing zoning. They were firm in their intention that the zoning surrounding this civic building be maintained: single unit family residential. Its policy, the Board continued, "is a matter of public record."

For two years, 1955 and 1956, the Town Hall was used by the Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church. Later the Lafayette Nursery School used the building. During this period the Dramateurs first rented the Town Hall.

First organized in Orinda in 1944, the Dramateurs had given performances there and in Berkeley. Since the Straw Hat Review no longer was performed in the Town Hall, the Dramateurs concluded a lease agreement with the Lafayette Improvement Association. Three plays had been given "in the round" in the summer of 1955: the delightful "Gigi", "The Four-poster", and "The Guardsman." The following summer two more productions were played "in the round," as the stage continued to be in "unsafe" condition. Several productions were rehearsed at the same time. By the end

of 1959 the Dramateurs had spent over \$7,000 on improvements including a new stage, better lighting and sound equipment, permanent seats, and interior decoration. There were no more productions "in the round", and in 1963 "Gigi" was given on stage. No more plays were done in Orinda or Berkeley. A listing of some of the productions -- "Teahouse of the August Moon," "The Rivals," "Death of a Salesman," "Dracula," "Hamlet," and the ever-popular "A Christmas Carol" -- gives some indication of the scope and talent of the Dramateurs.

In 1961 the Town Hall was broken into twice. All windows still having plain glass were replaced with wired glass ones. During the summer of the year following the Dramateurs installed stage and ceiling fans. The great improvement in ventilation was appreciated by all. Water seepage from the north side of the building was the next problem which was eliminated.

At its meeting of July, 1964, the Board of Directors determined the action it should take in view of its receipt of a letter from Sam Hall, attorney representing the Ghiglione and Bruzzone interests. In this letter Mr. Hall noted that ownership of the Town Hall should revert to his clients when it no longer was used as a town hall. The Board retained Ned Robinson as its attorney and entered into a quiet title action. The trial was originally set for July, 1965; it was held finally in February, 1966. Evidence of the gift from the Ghiglione family was presented by the Lafayette Improvement Association. No one else appeared to contest the Association's claim. The LIA won the case by default. It retained title to the Town Hall.

Making his inspection of the Town Hall in the fall of 1964, the Deputy State Fire Marshal noted a "greater than normal fire and life hazard." He declared the structure unsafe for public occupancy. Within

a week employees of the Contra Costa County Building Department made a further inspection. Fourteen electrical problems were listed. The report of the inspectors stated that portions of the building were badly rotted, some sections of the structure were built without a foundation or had slipped from their foundation, and that where there was a foundation the building was not fastened to it. The building "would fail" in minimum wind or earthquake loads as provided in the Building Code. The building was to be used only at minimum occupancy, the below-code portable wiring removed; and a program leading to repair or demolition of the structure was to be submitted to the County in thirty days.

The Lafayette Improvement Association, recognizing that years of alterations and volumes of material accumulated on the ground floor by the Dramateurs made an inspection difficult, hired an independent engineering firm to inspect the property. This "resulted in unexpected and welcome findings: the building was well designed, basically in good condition, and safe from a structural standpoint." Rotten wood "could be pulled off by the handful" from the base of the walls. However, the rot occurred because the exterior walls had been constructed "with a flare so that rain water would be deflected from the foundation." When landscape grading took place soil had come into contact with the wood. The damage was repairable. The engineers and members of the Board dug down and inward to the foundation "which appeared to go down six feet or so, and was stated to be adequate for a six-story building." It was found also that the building was securely fastened to its foundation. Following the procedure then in use the sills had been placed on newly-poured foundation concrete and nails driven down. After the concrete had hardened the structure was properly fastened to the foundation. The minimum engineers' estimate to bring the Town Hall up to code for

300 persons occupancy was \$28,500.

Ultimately the Lafayette Improvement Association and the Dramateurs voted to work together to make the Town Hall a safe public building. The windows on the south side were boarded in and the whole wall covered with sheet-rock. Fire sprinklers were installed throughout and fireproofing was undertaken. New restrooms were built, new floors laid, and better exits constructed. Heating and cooling equipment was installed, new auditorium seats were put in place, and the lighting was improved. For the stage a new floor, lighting and other equipment were installed. The Directors' meeting room on the first floor was refurbished. Outside the building landscaping, paving, and lighting were added.

The Lafayette Improvement Association voted \$2,000 toward the cost of the remodeling. The Dramateurs organized a "Save the Town Hall" drive with a goal of \$50,000. Meanwhile the Lafayette Fire District board ordered the building closed to all because of the fire hazard and "three recent violations." A plea to the County Building Inspector for limited use of the building was denied. Holding a series of rummage sales and other fund-raising activities and expending a tremendous amount of volunteer labor, the Dramateurs began to attain their financial goal. By July, 1965, it was announced that they had raised \$10,000 so far. In November the first phase of renovation was completed. The building was ready now for use by the Dramateurs, but not the general public.

The following February the building was ready for use by the public. The insurer estimated the value of the building to be \$42,500. Due to the recent improvements, however, there was a 75% drop in the fire insurance rate.

The Lafayette Improvement Association drew up a ten-year lease with the Dramateurs. The terms included a division of responsibility for

insurance and for the interior, exterior, and landscaping. The Dramateurs must allow the building to be rented to "compatible parties" of good reputation, such as the LafFrantics. The Board of Directors of the LIA must be able to meet there. Yearly rental was set at \$600.00. The lease was renewable.

The Lafayette Town Hall continues to be "home" to the Dramateurs. Improvements continue. Walkways and the curbing have been improved. More adequate storage space has been provided at the rear of the structure. Re-decorating has been undertaken.

For years the Lafayette Improvement Club, and later the Lafayette Improvement Association, had provided for the citizens of Lafayette their only form of local government. Matters of traffic, zoning, and signing became of increasing concern. (See page 12.) Periodically the LIA considered incorporation of the community. It worked with members of the "Lafayette Council" (representatives from the LIA, Lafayette Chamber of Commerce, and the Lafayette Design Project) in a study of all aspects of incorporation. Three incorporation elections were held. Debates had been sharp; opinions were strong. In July, 1968, the citizens voted in the affirmative: Lafayette was to become a City. The Lafayette Improvement Association continues to meet in the Town Hall, but it is no longer the sole voice for the community at large.

The "old Town Hall" still stands, a symbol of Lafayette's past and of its future. There people are entertained delightfully. There heated discussion of community issues takes place. It is our legacy from public-spirited men and women who early settled Lafayette. Many people worked to build the Town Hall; many struggled to keep it standing. There it is, sturdier than ever. It has been worth the trouble.

This history of the Lafayette Town Hall was written at the suggestion of Andrew H. Young, former President and member of the Board of Directors of the Lafayette Improvement Association, and presently a member of the County Planning Commission. It was decided to undertake an open-ended project such as this rather than to risk that much of historical value might never be published. This is not a definitive work. It was necessary to proceed with the task selectively, omitting much that is significant about people, organizations, and activities. It was decided to concentrate on the story of the Lafayette Town Hall itself and the ways in which it has been used to serve and entertain the people of Lafayette. In the preparation of this chronicle greatest use was made of the official records of the Lafayette Improvement Club and the Lafayette Improvement Association. Many people who served devotedly in important positions have not been mentioned, or noted only incidentally. Each of these people, each organization involved, has its own story to tell. Their contributions have been great. It is hoped that the stories of these past accomplishments will be told to us, so that we the present residents of Lafayette will be informed and inspired by their examples.

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The Story of the Lafayette Town Hall and The Dramateurs, Incorporated
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